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ABSTRACT

A survey of 80 city and regional magazines was undertaken to examine articles of media criticism. Of those, 78.5% responded. A total of 420 articles were received and were divided according to subject and geographical distribution. A critical analysis of representative articles determined that they represented significant criticism as defined in Theodore Peterson's "The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press." It was found that city magazines have adopted media criticism as a standard editorial practice, that most articles were published by the magazines in the largest cities, that most were about the print media, that most concerned local media performance and power, and that magazines in the Northeast and Far West were the most diligent media watchdogs. Common criticisms were that newspapers are inaccurate, sensational, and without substance; that they boost and protect "sacred cows" rather than criticize; that they ignore problems and issues out of self-interest; and that they allow advertising and class pressures to influence the news. (TJ)

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CRITICISM OF NEWS MEDIA IN CITY MAGAZINES

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

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Presented to the Magazine Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Seattle, Wash., August 1978.

Introduction

There is a tradition of press criticism in American magazines. The first modern-day media criticism was generated by a 14-part series in Collier's in 1911, when Will Irwin analyzed the social pressures that influence publishers and reporters to distort the news.[1]

In 1920, Upton Sinclair in the Nation criticized newspapers for being more interested in profit than in service to the public, and he called on readers to join him in "Building an Honest Newspaper" called "The National News." [2] In the American Mercury in 1930, H.L. Mencken made a similar observation when he complained of the conservatism and uniformity of U.S. newspapers, calling them "dull, uninspired, unintelligent." [3]

National magazines have continued to criticize newspapers. "What's Wrong With the Press?" asked Newsweek on Nov. 29, 1965. Kevin Phillips called for "Busting the Media Trusts" in the July 1977 Harper's. Alvin P. Sanoff first questioned "America's Press--Too Much Power for Too Few?" and then asked "Is the Press Living by a Double Standard" in U.S.

Dianne Young is a former editor at Southern Living and Teaching Assistant in journalism at the University of Texas, where she has done research on city magazines for a Master's Degree. Gene Burd is Associate Professor and held a grant from Magazine Publishers Association for a study of "Magazines in the Metropolis."

News & World Report issues of Aug. 15 and Oct. 10, 1977.

There is debate as to whether the first city magazine was Golden Era, begun in 1849; Honolulu's Paradise of the Pacific[4], begun in 1888; or New York's Town Topics, started before 1900.[5] But there is general agreement that the model for city magazine criticism of newspapers was established by The New Yorker when it was founded in 1925. Early New Yorker press review columns included "Behind the News," "The Current Press," "A Reporter at Large," and "The Press in Review." In 1927, "The Wayward Press" column was started and was written for nearly 20 years by Morris Markey and Robert Benchley before A.J. Liebling penned the column from the May 19, 1945, issue until his death in 1963.[6]

When the more recent wave of city magazines was prompted by the archetype San Diego city magazine in 1948, criticism of the local newspapers continued. In 1967, Philadelphia magazine firmly established hard-hitting press criticism by city magazines with its expose on Harry Karafin, investigative reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

The award-winning story on "The Reporter" by Gaeton Fonzi and Greg Walter revealed how Karafin used media power for his own cause by blackmailing illegal companies and shady businesses into using his services as a free-lance public relations man.[7] His firing after 30 years as a reporter clearly demonstrated the potential significance of press criticism in city magazines.

By 1971, the new New York magazine intensified the practice of criticizing the press; and in 1973, a new statewide "city magazine," Texas Monthly, extended the pattern, leading one observer to note that "Among the virtues of such publications is that of prodding the sometimes somnolent daily press and helping to keep both the dailies and local news broadcasters honest."[8]

Because the extent of press criticism in city magazines, as well as the configuration and possible impact of such criticism, had not been investigated, this project was an attempt to discover the extent and to discuss the content of media criticism in city magazines.

Methodology: Collection of Data

The difficulty of defining a city magazine universe for sampling was compounded by the fact that no complete list of city and regional magazines was available when the study was begun. (After the study was under way, in October 1977, Conference Management Corporation in Stamford, Conn., published the Directory of City and Regional Magazines.)

Rather than rely on a single source, such as only those magazines listed in Standard Rate and Data Service, it was decided to locate as many titles as possible from various sources. First, a preliminary list of city magazines was compiled from the 1977 Ayer Directory of Periodicals, the Standard Periodical Directory for 1977, and Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory. That list was supplemented by the names of various new city publications mentioned in recent issues of Folio. A few more titles were located by checking all current, major city telephone directories.

In addition, it was discovered that articles from 20 city magazines, with current editorial addresses, were listed in the 1975 and 1976 editions of Access Index and the 1974, 1975, and 1976 editions of the Popular Periodical Index. From all these sources, a complete list of 80 city magazines was assembled, 25 percent of which were at least partially indexed.

The complete list of city magazines includes the following:

CITY MAGAZINES

Aspen
Atlanta
Augusta
Austin
Baltimore
Baton Rouge
Birmingham
Boston
Buffalo
Capitalite
Charlotte
Chattanooga
Chicago
Chicago Monthly
Cincinnati
City of Memphis
Cleveland
Clevelander
Clovis
Columbia
Columbus Monthly
"D" (Dallas)
Dallas
Dayton U.S.A.
Detroiter
Detroit Life
Denver
The Denver Magazine
Duluthian Magazine
El Paso Today
Focus/Midwest
Fort Worth
Galveston
Georgetown Life
Honolulu
Houston
Hudson Valley
Indianapolis
Islander
Jacksonville
Kansas City Town Squire
Long Island Magazine (& Westchester)
Los Angeles
Louisville
Louisville Today
Miami
Metro (Norfolk) Magazine
Milwaukee Commerce
MPLS
Nashville!
New Orleans
New Norfolk (& Tidewater Virginia)
New West
New York
Palm Beach Life
Palm Springs Life
Philadelphia
Phoenix
Pittsburgh
Pittsburgher
Portland
SA (San Antonio)
SAM (Houston)
San Antonio
San Diego
San Francisco
Santa Fean
Sarasota
Savannah
Seattle
Shreveport
Sioux City
St. Louisan
Texas Monthly
Trenton
Tucson
Tulsa
Washingtonian
Washington Monthly
Wichita

Articles on media criticism from nine magazines (Atlanta, Austin, Birmingham, Chicago, Kansas City Town Squire, New York, SA, San Antonio, and Texas Monthly) were collected in person. Articles from Detroiter were ordered through Inter-Library Loan because the magazine had folded in December 1975. Seventy survey letters were mailed to the editors of the remaining magazines, requesting their help in gathering a master list and copies of all articles published by them on media criticism. Two versions of an initial letter were mailed, one to those magazines whose articles were indexed and another to the remainder. (See APPENDIX for copies of correspondence.)

A $1 check was included as enticement and to help cover the cost of copying the articles and/or mailing them in a self-addressed envelope provided for return mail. Because most magazines reach a slack time

in production at the beginning of each month, and because summer is usually slower, initial letters were mailed at the end of July 1977. It is probable that the check and the timing of the letters (to arrive early in the week during a slower period) helped elicit more responses. Follow-up requests, including a brief reminder and another $1 check, were mailed during the first week of September to those editors who had not replied to the initial letter.

Of the 70 letters mailed, five were returned undelivered; 10 magazines never replied to either mailing. Fifty-five magazines did reply for an overall response rate of 78.5 percent. (Three magazines, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Washingtonian, wrote that they were unable to fill the request because of time problems. Because those magazines were indexed, their articles were ordered through Inter-Library Loan, so they are represented in the sample.)

Thirty-three of the 55 magazines mailed back articles, and 19 responded that they had not published articles criticizing the media. One magazine, Long Island, was planning a media review. Of the 80 magazines listed, 46 (approximately 57%) did publish articles about the news media. Focus/Midwest was discarded because its editors and publishers also produce the St. Louis Journalism Review and were considered more likely to review media than most city magazines.

Methodology: Analysis of Data

A total of 420 articles from 45 city magazines were collected, but because of the number and variety of treatment, it was deemed too cumbersome to prepare an analysis or summary of each article other than the master bibliography. Instead of imposing traditional categories of content analysis,[9] specific subject divisions were derived from the

data. Three major divisions were city magazine analysis of news coverage by: (1) local print media; (2) local broadcast media; and (3) general, non-local or national broadcast and/or print media. Generally, each major category contained more than 20 articles. Ten minor subject divisions, most containing less than 20 articles, were also derived from the data. They were: (1) "Media" columns; (2) history/personality/promotional articles; (3) editorials and editorialists; (4) alternative papers; (5) city images; (6) sports and sportscasting; (7) women in the media; (8) newspaper strikes; (9) Don Bolles, Phoenix investigative reporter murdered; and (10) magazines.

To determine geographical distribution of media criticism in city magazines, two articles from each major subject division listed above were chosen from each of the following five geographical areas and their magazines:

NORTHEAST: Boston, Baltimore, Buffalo, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgher, Washingtonian, and Washington Monthly.

SOUTHEAST: Atlanta, Birmingham, City of Memphis, Jacksonville, Louisville Today, Miami, Nashville!, New Orleans, and Shreveport.

MIDWEST: Chicago, Chicago Monthly, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus Monthly, Detroiter, Indianapolis, Town Squire, MPLS, Tulsa, and Sioux City.

SOUTHWEST: Aspen, Austin, "D", Dallas, Denver, El Paso Today, Houston, Phoenix, Texas Monthly, Tucson, SA, and San Antonio.

FAR WEST: Honolulu, Los Angeles, New West, and San Diego.

An intensive, descriptive critical analysis was made of the 10 articles representing each subject division. The articles chosen represented significant criticism as measured by Peterson in his

"Social Responsibility Theory of the Press."[10] The 10 articles were equally divided between two thematic categories derived from Peterson's seven themes. First, the theme of Peterson's points one, two, and seven: the criticisms that the media exercise their power for their own ends and propagate their own opinions in politics and economics at the expense of opposing views; that media are subservient to big business and let advertisers control editorial policies and content; and that media make access for newcomers difficult, thereby endangering the free and open marketplace of ideas.[11] This is the theme of power.

Second, the theme of Peterson's points three, four, five, and six: the criticisms that the media resist social change and pay more attention to the superficial and sensational than the significant in news; that media present entertainment lacking in substance; that media endanger public morals; and that media sometimes invade the privacy of individuals without just cause.[12] This is the theme of performance.

Examples of both these thematic categories representing each geographical area were chosen for analysis on the basis of how the articles discussed the topics of the themes and which articles did the best jobs by commonly accepted standards of critical writings and methods of critical analysis.[13]

Findings

It appears that city magazines have definitely adopted media criticism as a standard editorial practice by watching the "watchdog" and its procedures, use of power, and performance. There were 420 articles written about the media in 45 city magazines mainly in the period of

1973-1977. Those that can be classified as criticism tend to use the Peterson thematic categories as tools to assess media power and performance.

Approximately 25 percent of the magazines published almost 70 percent of the total number of articles collected. The magazines publishing the greatest number of media articles tend to be those in the larger cities. That is, 11 magazines had 273 articles, 67.6 percent of the total:

City Magazine:	Rank:	No. Articles:	% of Total:
New York	1	88	21.0%
Chicago	2	38	9.1%
Washingtonian	3	24	5.7%
Washington Monthly	4	23	5.5%
Atlanta	4	23	5.5%
Texas Monthly	5	21	5.0%
Philadelphia	6	16	3.8%
"D"	7	15	3.6%
New West	8	12	2.9%
Cleveland	8	12	2.9%
New Orleans	9	11	2.6%

The number of such articles appears to have increased within the last three years. Seventy-four percent of the articles were published from January 1975 through approximately August 1977. (Some magazines may have mailed only their recent articles, and a minor few came in beyond August. Also, since articles from Atlanta, Chicago, New York, and Texas Monthly were searched and collected in person, those magazines' responses may have been larger and more thorough. However, if those are removed from the above list of the 11 top magazines, the remaining seven (15.5%) still published 113 articles, or more than 26 percent of the 420 articles collected.)

The city magazines tend to write most about print media. More than half the articles dealt with local or national newspapers. Only 15 articles (7%) discussed magazines. Only 38 percent discussed

electronic media, and 80 percent of those concentrated on television rather than radio. Twelve percent of the articles examined both print and electronic media together in "general media" reviews.

The vast majority (71%) of the articles (297) concern local media performance and power, while only 103 (25%) appraise national media. The remaining four percent combine local and national. Generally, the magazines in larger cities are the ones confident or knowledgeable enough to criticize national or network performance, but in many cases the home city of the magazine is also the home of the national medium.

By far, the most common article in the 10 minor subject divisions is the regular "Media" column or feature. Nineteen of the 45 magazines publish such a column under titles like "Media," "Television," "Tube," "Communication," or "Broadcast." Some are lengthy; others are short. Topics range from hirings and firings in local media staffs to newspaper wars, newscasters' competition, and distortion of civic images.

While most of the more than 70 articles criticizing the local print media are longer, detailed observations on one newspaper or print media practice, approximately 20 percent of the 70 were under regular "Media" columns. Minor subject divisions like "History/Personality/Promotional" articles and "Women in the Media" tended to reveal little about news practices and performance. However, the sections on "Editorials and Editorialists" explored uncovered and unchallenged areas, and "Sports and Sportscasting" sections in city magazines reveal that even entertainment news can be criticized for a lack of social responsibility.

Authors for these articles range from staff editors to free-lance writers with experience and credentials for criticism, and they tend to

apply most--or at least some--of Peterson's themes. In general, the magazines in the Northeast and Far West are the more diligent media "watchdogs," with harder, investigative reporting and analysis. Next is the Southwest, and, last, the Southeast and Midwest, whose magazines appear more cautious and deal more in subjective generalities. Most city magazines tend to be negative about local newspapers.

Common criticisms are that newspapers are inaccurate, sensational, and without substance; that they boost and protect "sacred cows" rather than criticize; that they ignore problems and issues for the sake of the publications' self-interests; and that they allow advertising and class pressures to influence news and permit a blurring of lines between news and ads, as in real estate sections. The city magazines tend to be less critical of the alternative press and of magazines!

In this study, 20 magazines wrote about television news alone, and eight did so in regular "Media" or television columns. The authors range from well-known and experienced media critics to local freelance writers. Electronic media criticism sounds these common complaints: that there is little difference among networks and station content because they are competing for the same bland audience; that there is a lack of serious, in-depth programming and probing on local problems and controversy; that advertisers, agents, and managers dominate programs by news packaging of "happy talk" by anchor "stars" dwelling on sensational crime and violence to increase viewer ratings and profit.

The city magazines are making room for substantive reporting on television performance. Northeast and Far West magazines give more

details and examples to support their criticism. Southwestern magazines are less methodical, while Midwestern and Southeastern magazines are the most cautious in covering and criticizing local television news.

In dealing with criticism of media beyond the local community, city magazines (in some 60 articles) in this study point out how national media and those in the area deserve criticism for: preference for local, "soft" news over "hard" national and international news; a liberal press bias and the dangers of arrogant, investigative reporting; the related "checkbook" journalism of buying and selling the news; a press antipathy toward business and the economic system; and the endless press squeeze between consumers and advertisers who support the mass media, as in "action lines."

Many of the articles (20%) are found in "Media" columns or in regular features, with Northeastern magazines more apt to do them. In this category, the criticism tends to be more general, dealing with ideas and theories rather than specifics, and less substantiated by examples.

Conclusions

City magazines are continuing the tradition of media criticism begun by early American magazines. The editorial practice seems to be firmly established, and with the decline of city journalism reviews and the recent rise in public criticism and skepticism of the media, the increasing amount of media criticism in city magazines possibly fills a local and national communication vacuum.

Overall, the city magazines studied here seem to apply the standard, objective measures listed in Peterson's theory of social

responsibility. The authors offer concrete documentation to support their criticisms rather than giving purely subjective responses. They have, in effect, taken the journalistic leadership of watching the watchdog.

Although many of the articles chastise the sensational and insignificant fare of the news media, more are concerned with the media's use of power--that is, the negative aspects of owner/editor and business/advertiser control or manipulation of news. More and more, press critics point to the possibility of editors' and reporters' projecting their corporate bias into stories.

In the major subject divisions, both criticism of power and criticism of performance are interwoven. Frequently, documented or alleged control or influence by business or advertisers is related to poor editorial quality. Likewise, a medium's editorial stance is often linked to its ownership.

The majority of city magazine articles are not based upon the media's coverage of a special event; rather, they tend to be more general reviews, with conclusions based on a number of day-to-day incidents or on an overview of general performance.

In general, the city magazines of the Northeast and Far West, near national media centers and often near older, slower growing, highly populated areas, tend to be more critical and to give the most detailed and well-documented criticism. It appears media criticism may be related to the age and complexity of urban settings, with unchallenged growth creating a booster atmosphere where media criticism is less likely to take place. Media saturation may also

be related to the amount and intensity of media criticism in an area.

Most of the city magazines in the study utilize experienced and often well-known media critics as authors. The quality of the media criticism may be approaching that of the criticism of the other "arts," as increasingly the articles are serious, investigative essays, rather than mere subjective therapy prompted by editorial jealousy or anger.

The fact that most of the articles are negative perhaps indicates the maturity of this new editorial "art form." The articles appear to offer a type of "service" to today's consumer of the news. They serve to help citizens "survive" as they seek out and sort out information needs in an urban setting.[14]

#

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
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Department of Journalism
Box 7818/Phone 512—471-1845

August 1977

Would you take a few minutes to help me complete a national survey of city magazine articles which have criticized the news media?

Can you recall any specific examples of such criticism or reviews of the press or broadcast media in recent or back issues of your publication? If so, I enclose $1. Could you possibly pull tear sheets or xerox copies of these articles and mail them to me in the enclosed envelope within the next two weeks?

If postage is more than the $1 I have provided, I am quite willing to reimburse you for that as well as to pay for the necessary issues or cost of copying the articles.

Your magazine was selected from a thorough list drawn from the 1977 Ayer Directory of Publications, the Standard Periodical Directory for 1977 and Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory. Your response is extremely important for the depth and validity of my master's thesis, which will determine if city magazines have become critics of the news media due to the decline of local journalism reviews.

Because I simply do not have the funds to travel to the various city magazine offices in order to get the needed information, your response and aid are essential to the success of my efforts. Therefore, any help and suggestions you can provide will be greatly appreciated.

If you are interested in receiving a report on the findings of this research, merely indicate your interest with your reply, and I will be glad to send you one. This is a chance for you to see what other city magazines like yours are doing.

Thank you for taking the time to read this request, and, especially, thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Dianne Young
Teaching Assistant
Journalism Department
University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712

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AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712

Department of Journalism
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August 1977

Would you take a few minutes to help me complete a national survey of city magazine articles which have criticized the news media?

According to Access Index for periodicals, your magazine has run several articles about the press or broadcast media which would be relevant to my research. (Attached is a list of the references I have been able to locate for the 1974-76 period.)

In addition, can you recall any other specific examples of such reviews of the press or broadcast media in recent or back issues of your publication? If so, I enclose $1. Could you possibly pull tear sheets or xerox copies of the listed articles and any others you recall and mail them to me in the enclosed envelope within the next two weeks?

If postage is more than the $1 I have provided, I am quite willing to reimburse you for that as well as to pay for the necessary issues or cost of copying the articles.

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Thank you for taking the time to read this request, and, especially, thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Dianne Young

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
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September 15, 1977

During the beginning of August, I mailed you a letter requesting your help in a research project about city magazines. In my letter I included a $1 check and asked you to mail me copies of any articles from your magazine that have criticized the news media.

In case you were away or too busy to fill my request before, may I ask you to do so now? I am trying to get the most complete collection of city magazine articles criticizing the press or broadcast media that I can. This would mean getting a response from all the city magazines I have contacted.

If you would like to see what other city magazines are doing, merely indicate your interest with your reply, and I will be glad to send you a report of my findings.

I would appreciate your earliest reply, and in case the first check I sent was misplaced, I am enclosing another $1 check to cover any reproduction and postage expenses. If expenses are more than the $1 I have provided, I am quite willing to reimburse you.

Thank you for taking the time to fill my request. Your response and aid are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

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CRITICISM OF NEWS MEDIA IN CITY MAGAZINES

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ABSTRACT

This national survey of city magazines found them continuing a magazine tradition of press criticism, and an analysis of 420 articles from 45 magazines found they apply the seven Peterson themes of media criticism in measuring social responsibility.

The study briefly surveys classic examples of magazine criticism of the press, citing significant dates in its development, and then attempts to discover its recent extent in the five-year period of 1973-1977.

To get an adequate sample, the project dealt with the problems of defining city magazines and of obtaining updated lists and directories from frequently inadequate indexes needed to solicit mail response for collecting examples. A mail questionnaire to 70 magazines brought a response of 78.5 percent, and it was found that 57 percent of the magazines responding did print some media criticism or articles on the media.

An analysis of the geographic distribution of media criticism was made for the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and Far West; and three major divisions of analysis included articles on local print media, local broadcast media, and non-local media for each area.

It was found that 25 percent of the magazines published almost 70 percent of the total articles collected, and they tended to be those of the larger cities. The articles dealt mostly with local print media, although criticism of the electronic media is increasing.

The "Media" column was found to be the most common article form, and experienced, often well-known, writers were often used by the magazines. The most diligent magazine media watchdogs were found in the Northeast and Far West.

Typical media criticisms in the magazines found newspapers inadequate; sensational; and displaying a tendency to boost rather than criticize, to ignore problems and issues for the sake of the publications' self-interests, and to allow class pressures and advertising to blur lines between news and ads.

Electronic media were criticized for lack of serious in-depth reporting, bland programming by networks, excessive showing of violence and crime, and packaging of "happy talk" by anchor "stars" to increase viewer ratings and station profits.

Presented to the Magazine Division at the Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention in Seattle, Wash., August 1978.